



## RPT-COLUMN-Australia's shock election shows killing coal mining is no sure thing: Russell

5 MIN READ



By Clyde Russell

The conservative Liberal Party-led coalition is likely to have pulled off one of the great political escapes by returning to office for a third term, confounding polls and pundits who thought Labor was a near certainty to win the May 18 election.

While Prime Minister Scott Morrison may not secure an outright majority in the 151-seat lower house of parliament, results indicated that Labor, led by former unionist Bill Shorten, would have no chance of victory.

One of the battlegrounds between the two major parties in the campaign had been climate change, with Labor promising far stronger action than the Coalition, which counts among its parliamentarians several who are decidedly pro-coal and sceptical of the science of climate change.

Morrison, prior to becoming the third Liberal leader in five years last August, once brandished a lump of coal in parliament in a show of support for the mining industry and the use of the fuel in generating electricity.

Australia vies with Indonesia for the title of the world's largest coal exporter, and is dominant in the global market for high-quality coking coal used to make steel.

The Liberal victory means the coal mining and coal-using electricity sectors have been spared a Labor government that would have in all likelihood made it harder for them to grow.

A returned Liberal government is likely to pursue policies more friendly to the coal industry, while at the same time being cautious on expanding support for renewable energy.

"Start Adani," was a two-word tweet from Resources Minister Matt Canavan, about 2 3/4 hours after voting closed on May 18, when it was starting to become clear that the Liberals were about to pull off a stunning victory.

That was a reference to the Carmichael mine in Queensland state being proposed by India's Adani Enterprises, which is bitterly opposed by environmentalists who say the world can ill afford the pollution that will result from the burning of its 8 million tonnes a year output.

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The election showed that in the constituencies near the mine, voters chose the prospect of jobs over climate concerns.

## GREEN ACTIVISTS IGNORED

The Liberals had expected to lose a swag of seats in Queensland, but instead they held all their marginal constituencies and even took two from Labor.

It's not clear whether this strong result in the state most reliant on coal mining is a repudiation of Labor's climate policies, or more a reflection of voter disquiet over Labor's other policies that would have resulted in higher taxes and spending.

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However, a convoy of activists led by longstanding environmental campaigner and former Australian Greens leader Bob Brown, which travelled through Queensland in the weeks prior to the election to call for the Adani mine to be scrapped, probably hurt their cause more than it helped.

Queenslanders, particularly those outside the main city of Brisbane, have a reputation for being tight-knit community-focused people that don't like outsiders telling them what to do.

It doesn't take much imagination to see that a road procession of largely well-heeled leftist city folk telling them to abandon a major regional industry would get their hackles up.

Where the message of climate change played well in Australia was in those rich suburbs of cities, with climate change denier and former prime minister Tony Abbott losing his Sydney-based seat to independent candidate and former Olympic skier Zali Steggall, who campaigned in favour of stronger environmental policies.

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But Steggall's victory was very much a consolation prize for green activists, and it's likely that several leading Liberal government members will try and keep new coal-fired power plants as an option for Australia's energy needs.

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The Liberals may also favour fossil fuels such as natural gas when it comes to the country's energy system, which has been in crisis for several years because of the soaring cost of electricity and natural gas, which is often blamed on the rise of the liquefied natural gas (LNG) export industry.

For Australia's environmentalists, the election delivered a brutal message, namely they have yet to win over people outside the major cities.

The green lobby will have to come to terms with the reality that the election showed the failure of blanket calls to end all coal mining and natural gas exploration, without having convinced voters that low-cost alternatives are available and that jobs will be

protected.

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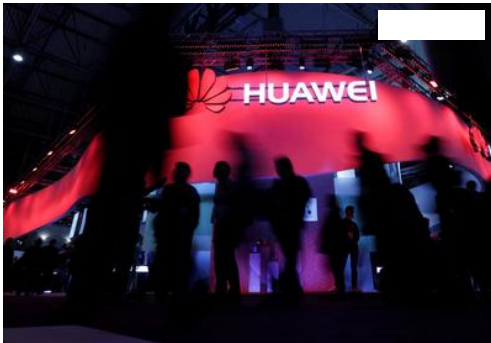
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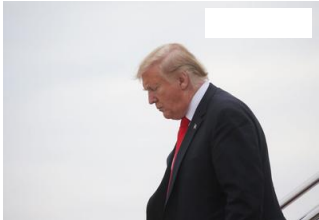
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